

The anxieties of the literary translator

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Every year, through the Sam Hood Translation Prize (see inside back cover), *Omnibus* encourages its readers to try their hands at translating creatively. Here Oliver Taplin, founding editor of *Omnibus*, talks about the challenges of translating classical texts and explores the choices he has had to make in translating Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.

In the Introduction to his version of Virgil *Aeneid* book 6 (published posthumously in 2016), the poet Seamus Heaney contrasts this undertaking with the kind of literal translation exercises he used to have to produce at school. He had become, he says, 'a writer of verse who has other things than literal accuracy on his mind and in his ear: rhythm and metre and lineation, the voice and its pacing, the need for a diction decorous enough for Virgil but not so antique as to sound out of tune with a more contemporary idiom – all the fleeting, fitful anxieties that afflict the literary translator.' What, then, is a 'literary translator', and what is so nerve-racking about it?

The term 'translation' covers a wide range: pick up a 'translation' of (say) Aeschylus and you might find very different approaches to the same text, as our examples show, from a close 'crib', such as in most of the Loeb facing-page editions at one extreme, to the unfettered flights of a poet like Ezra Pound or Ted Hughes at the other. 'Literary translation' is appropriate for those versions that make it their priority to try to convey the artistic, aesthetic qualities of the original; to transmit across languages the 'feel' and not only the basic sense. This is especially challenging when it is poetry that is being attempted. Anyone who tries their hand at translating poetry has to have some ideas, more or less conscious, about what are the main qualities that they hope to get across. Every syllable of every translation is, in fact, a choice – there is not one single word that must be translated a particular way; and each translator promotes their own priorities, whether aware of them or not. And so each and every choice of word and phrase affects, to a greater or lesser extent, the nuance, tone, rhythm, clarity, obscurity, level, pace, musicality, colour, and feel of the work. That's what induces the fleeting, fitful anxieties that Heaney wrote

about.

Foreignizing/domesticating

The range of possible kinds of translation is usually calibrated along terms such as 'close' and 'loose', 'literal' and 'elaborated', 'faithful' and 'free' – although what these mean in practice becomes less clear the more closely you examine them. Literary translation can and usually does constantly shift around across a range of points and levels between these apparent polarities. A pair of terms for a further range of relationships between the original and the translated version has also become current in Translation Studies: 'foreignization' and 'domestication' (first coined by Lawrence Venuti, an American translator and theorizer of translation). 'Domestication' means making the language and world of the work feel comfortable, familiar, contemporary. 'Foreignization', on the contrary, deliberately sets out to bring out the strangeness and distance and discomfort that are bound to be inherent in a work of literature that comes from another era and, often, a highly alien culture. Much of the time translators can find that there is some kind of blend or shifting variegation between these two apparently contrasting aesthetics.

In everyday speech, to give a simple example, most of us are happy to use familiar contractions like 'can't', 'you're', 'I'm', 'here's'. But in a written translation, some regard these as over-domestication. On the other hand, translators can reach for quite rare or high expressions of the sort that some others would regard as too strange, outlandish, or 'foreignized'. But literary translation calls for a degree of poeticizing of this sort: when a recent translator of the *Iliad* boasted 'I have kept clear of 'poeticizing'

Homer', it made it sound as if Homer's Greek is not itself poetry!

Choices about closeness and freedom, foreignization and domestication crop up in every line – and often in surprising and twisting ways. These choices have faced me as I have been working on a new verse translation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, to be published by Norton this year. To give an example, throughout the first two plays of the *Oresteia* there are constant references to the dark powers that are called in Greek *Erinyes* (singular *Erinys*); and then in the third play they are actually embodied as the chorus. These scary divinities are almost universally known as 'the Furies', a word derived from their Latin equivalent '*Furiae*'. But 'Furies' has a specious familiarity – it makes us feel as if we know about them. I have wanted to revive their terrifying strangeness, and so I have foreignized and called them *Erinyes* – more awkward even to pronounce, let alone to pin down. On the other hand, to pick an example at random, the name *Pleisthenes* occurs twice towards the end of *Agamemnon* in connection with the curse on the family. It seems he was an ancestor, but nobody is clear who he was or where he fits in. Both times I have replaced his name with the word 'blood-line'. This slight domestication seemed to me preferable to introducing an obscure name which carries no particular associations for us.

An *Agamemnon* sample

The best way to bring out how very different translations and their priorities can be is simply to collect several versions of the same brief passage. The bit I have selected from the first play in Aeschylus' trilogy, *Agamemnon* (lines 1560–64), was chosen almost at random, except that I have purposely gone for a passage originally sung by the chorus in a complex metre because that calls for more crafting (or poeticizing) than the relatively plain dialogue passages in the regular iambic metre. The text and a series of translations are in the box, above right. The context is this: Clytemnestra has confronted the chorus of old men after she has slaughtered Agamemnon, and boasts proudly of

her achievement; the chorus are indignant against her crime, but eventually they have to concede that she is not totally without justification, even though they still condemn her.

Read through the different versions gathered here. See what you think the translators are trying to do with the text, and whether you think they succeed.

Alan Sommerstein's translation (1) is the one that you will see alongside the Greek in the Loeb edition. It is close and unpoeticizing; there are no stand-out 'foreignized' words and its line-for-line rendering matches the Greek. We might ask what the overall register of the language is: 'he who does shall suffer, for that is his ordinance', for example, does not sound like plain everyday speech, nor yet quite like poetry. Overall, though, it gives us a good benchmark for a straightforward, literally accurate translation.

But, as we've seen, other approaches are possible. In translations (2) and (3), two outstanding modern poets work from the Greek yet infuse it with their own individual poetic voices. You can perhaps hear that Tony Harrison's version (2) was written to be performed aloud, with punchy rhythm and alliteration capturing and even extending Aeschylus' pattern of repetitions into the last lines. This version goes all out for foreignization, with compound coinages and some anglo-saxon colouring like 'blood-grudge'.

In complete contrast, Anne Carson (3) uses monosyllables and broken-up line-lengths to produce a stark austerity. Her text appears centred, rather than justified to the left, and we might think that this indicates it is primarily intended to be read from the page, rather than performed aloud. Overall, Carson seems to tone down rather than to play up Aeschylus' games with the sound of the words.

Both these versions are creative, and poetic. What about the more mainstream versions, of the kind most widely used by students? One fairly recent one is by Alan Shapiro and Peter Burian (4). They go for a slightly archaic effect ('ravager', 'slayer'), but where Carson gives the chorus an explanatory aside ('But here's the key'), they have the more literal 'But it abides'. This is closer to the Greek, and also preserves the echo, linking the law to Zeus' presence as its enforcer.

The Penguin translation by Robert Fagles (5) is by far the best-seller, though I must admit I cannot see anything special about it. Like Shapiro and Burian, Fagles balances a respect for the literal meaning of the Greek with the tone and overall force of the passage. The stark one-word sentence 'Justice.' is, however, his own addition, going beyond the Greek. Does this strengthen the meaning? Or does it add a slightly crude and simplified assertiveness?

A new rhythm

I have no intention of disparaging these 'rival' translations: they are none of them bad (not even Fagles!). What I do want to do with this gathered comparison is to be helped to think about how my own version is different – what it suggests about my priorities. So here it is – about to be published, and too late to change it!

*Damnation meets with condemnation back:
to judge is difficult.
The plunderer gets plundered in his turn,
the killer pays for guilt.
Yet this remains as long as Zeus remains
upon his throne secure:
who does the deed must suffer for the deed –
that's the eternal law.*

The most obvious difference is that this is all set in regular rhythmical couplets. The only other version with a clear beat is the Tony Harrison, which has an even stronger, more regular stress. And mine is the only one with rhyme – or, rather, not rhyme so

Text and translations:

ὄνειδος ἦκει τόδ' ἀντ' ὀνειδούς,
δύσμαχα δ' ἐστὶ κρίναι.
φέρει φέροντ', ἐκτίνει δ' ὁ καίων-
μῖναι δὲ μῖνοντος ἐν θρόνῳ Διὸς
παθεῖν τὸν ἔρξαντα· θέσμιον γάρ.
Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1560–64
(text: Loeb edition, ed. A. H. Sommerstein)

1. Alan Sommerstein (Loeb, 2008)
Insult comes in return for insult,
and it is a hard struggle to judge.
The ravager is ravaged, the killer pays;
it remains firm while Zeus remains on his throne
that he who does shall suffer, for that is his ordinance.
2. Tony Harrison (1981)
Choler for choler, bloodgrudge for bloodgrudge.
While Zeus the high he-god is still the gods' clanchief
the law for the living is killers get killed.
3. Anne Carson (2008)
She shoots back taunt for taunt.
How to judge? The thief is robbed, the
killer pays his price.
But here's the key: while Zeus sits on his
throne
the doer must suffer. That is the law.
4. Alan Shapiro and Peter Burian (2003)
Charge answers charge, and who can weigh
them, sift
right from wrong? The ravager
is ravaged, the slayer slain. But it abides,
while Zeus on his throne abides,
that he who does will suffer. That is law.
5. Robert Fagles (Penguin, 1986)
Each charge meets counter-charge.
None can judge between them. Justice.
The plunderer plundered, the killer pays the price.
The truth still holds while Zeus still holds the throne:
the one who acts must suffer –
that is law.

much as sound-matches or half-echoes: 'difficult/pays for guilt'; 'his throne secure/eternal law'. One intended effect of this kind of sound-patterning, which I have used in almost all the lyric passages, is that it brings in a suggestion of song and of being set to music. Here I also hope that this verse-form produces an element of incantation almost: the chorus are reaching towards some kind of higher cosmic ordering.

My version is on the wordy side; I could wish that I had used rather fewer words, though I think that overall my translation uses fewer words than most. In this particular passage the lack of brevity is largely the result of slight expansions beyond the briefest possible rendering. I have, for example, added 'for guilt' to 'the killer pays'; and the spelling-out of 'for the deed' after 'must suffer' produces a kind of proverbial echo of 'who does the deed'. So the phrases are not mere padding, because they give (or are meant to give) the English an extra kind of pace that suggests 'this is the way things have to be'. The words run along with a kind of unstoppable momentum.

You can take a horse to water, but you can't make it drink! I am not expecting that you or anyone should positively like my version – although I hope you might! What I have tried to bring out, though, is the way that every word of every translation is a choice. A choice which, whether conscious or not, serves the individual translator's priorities.